

Painting software

The more advanced painting programs become, the more they seek to recreate traditional artistic media. Adam Banks paints a perfect picture by rounding up six inexpensive options

These days, we all use our PCs to edit and enhance photographs, but they can also help with more traditional and artistic image work. 'Natural media' software mimics art media such as oils, watercolours and pastels, and is suitable for all kinds of users, from dabbling amateurs to fine artists and commercial illustrators to animators. In this group test, we have tried out six of the most affordable programs to find out which is the most suitable painting program for you.

The grandfather of all natural media software is Painter, now owned by Corel. It is packed with clever features and is a favourite with professionals, but it is too expensive for most users and quite hard to learn. A cut-down version, Painter Essentials, leads the field of lower-cost rivals, but it has some strong competitors from smaller software companies.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Good image editors, such as Photoshop Elements and Corel Paint Shop Pro, now provide brush tools for sketching, painting and calligraphy. These are quite advanced in recent versions and may cover all your needs. Having said that, however, you may not want to shell out for a do-it-all image editor, or you may prefer to do your painting in a program designed for the job rather than one that's cluttered with other features. Furthermore, the natural media programs on test do have some extra tricks.

All the programs here provide a variety of art tools, including brushes, pencils, ink and pastels. You simply click and drag on the canvas to make strokes, building up a picture in the same way you would with real art materials. In fact, if you are not already an experienced artist, it's well worth trawling the internet or your local bookshop for some basic art tutorials. While the software gets you started with a lot less fuss and mess than a box of paints, the actual painting is still down to you.

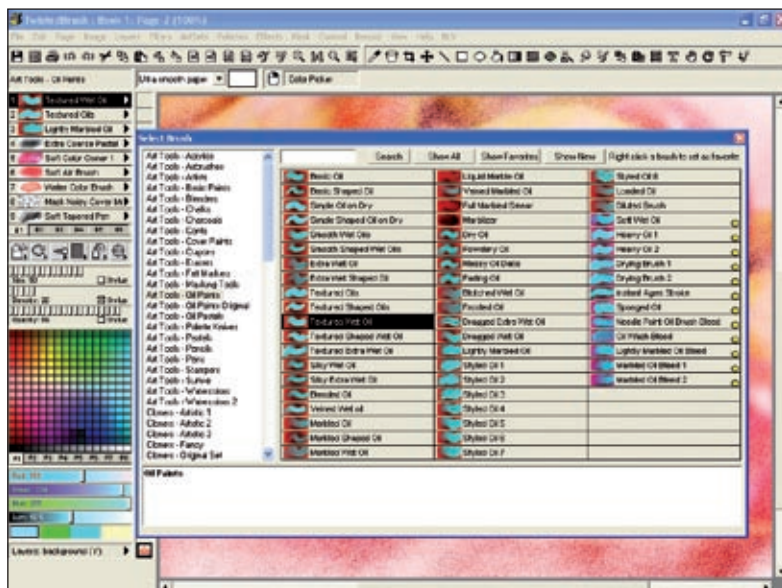
One way to get a head start is to work directly from a photograph. If you want to do this, look for 'cloning' or 'tracing' functions. These let you open an image file, display it as a background to your work in one way or another, then paint over it, picking up colour from the photograph to re-create it in brush strokes. This can be quite effective, especially if you approach the task in the same way as painting from scratch, filling in the background first with large strokes and finishing with the detail, perhaps adding some extra highlights and shadows. Some programs can also automate this process, with varying degrees of success.

KEEP TAKING THE TABLET

Using a graphics tablet with a stylus is far more practical than painting with the mouse. Most of these programs will respond to stylus pressure, so pressing down harder will create a thicker stroke; Corel Painter Essentials also responds to tilt and more advanced control options available with some Wacom tablets, and TwistedBrush lets you decide which aspects of the brush stroke respond to pressure.

The very small graphics tablets that are available at low prices aren't particularly good for this, because they may detect pressure crudely or not at all, and you won't have room to make sweeping strokes or work on your whole painting at once. We used Wacom's Intuos3 A5 Wide (www.wacom-europe.com/int/products/intuos3), which matches the shape of a widescreen monitor and is ideal for painting. If you're stuck with a mouse, though, you can still get good results.

Natural media programs tend to encourage working at fairly small sizes; at higher resolutions, large brushes may not work fast enough for comfortable painting. You'll want a larger canvas if you plan to print your art. In each case, you can save your work in the software's native format, to continue working on it later, or export it in a standard image format such as JPEG.



◀ All the programs here provide a variety of art tools, including brushes, pencils, ink and pastels

THIS MONTH

Ambient Design ArtRage 2.2 Full Edition
Page 124

Corel Painter Essentials 3
Page 124

Microsoft Expression Studio
Page 125

NaturePainter Digital Canvas
Page 125

Pixarra TwistedBrush 13.5
Page 126

Streetwise Software Professor Franklin's Instant Photo Artist 2.0
Page 126

AMBIENT DESIGN

ArtRage 2.2 Full Edition

★★★★★

£10 inc VAT



Despite the scary name, ArtRage is a sweet little painting program that'll appeal to both adults and kids. It's the cheapest product here, costing a tanner at current exchange rates, yet it's also the most polished. When you run it, you can't fail to notice its unique user interface, which gives you a complete break from everything Windows while you do your painting.

The blank canvas takes centre stage, with palettes arranged around the edges. These can be rolled out of the way by clicking a clearly marked green tab, but disappear automatically if you go near them while painting. Two quadrants in the bottom corners contain the main art tools and a colour spectrum. You'll instantly feel you're in a creative environment.

It does take a bit of getting used to; for example, we loved the way a little sheet of paper bounced up and down when we clicked the top of the bottom palette, and tried it 18 times before we realised it was creating new layers, each of which we then had to delete individually.

The array of media at the bottom left is standard, with 12 options including brush, pencil, palette knife and crayons. What may seem disappointing at first is that there are no sets of tools within these; you just get a few basic settings to adjust, such as pressure and paint loading. But when you start painting any disappointment vanishes, because ArtRage does what none of the other programs can: it gives you the real feeling of smooshing paint around. Brush strokes lay down a thick impasto with smeary bristle marks and, best of all, the brush tip rotates as you move around. You can't control the angle of the brush (graphics tablet

pressure affects the stroke, but not tilt), yet it feels as if you can, because it follows your hand in a natural way.

This trick also works brilliantly with tools such as the Roller, which squashes out the bristle marks and smears paint around very convincingly. Even at large sizes, the tools are



▲ ArtRage 2.2 Full Edition really does give you the sense of smooshing paint around

responsive and tremendous fun to play around with. Your canvas is set to the screen resolution by default, but can be any size, and you can also pick from a choice of paper textures. If you want to work from a photo, click the Load Tracing Image button to display it as a faint background image, then clone over it with any of the tools, turning the photo on and off by pressing T.

ArtRage doesn't do watercolour effects, but everything else is excellent. A new version, 2.5, is due for release shortly (free to registered users) with even more features, including enhanced layer functionality. It's also available for the Mac and in an ultra-mobile PC version. There's a free edition, based on version 1, but ArtRage 2 is so cheap you may as well buy it straight away.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent value
- ✓ Easy to use
- ✓ Satisfyingly smooshy paints

PAINTING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP or later, 800MHz Pentium processor, 128MB RAM
SUPPLIER www.artrage.com
DETAILS www.artrage.com

COREL

Painter Essentials 3

★★★★★

£60 inc VAT

Painter Essentials is the budget edition of the undisputed leader in natural media software. The current version is a bit long in the tooth, having been released in October 2005 as a cut-down version of Painter IX; Painter has moved on to version X. Essentials 3 can open Painter X files, however, thanks to a recent update. PC and Mac versions are both included in the box.

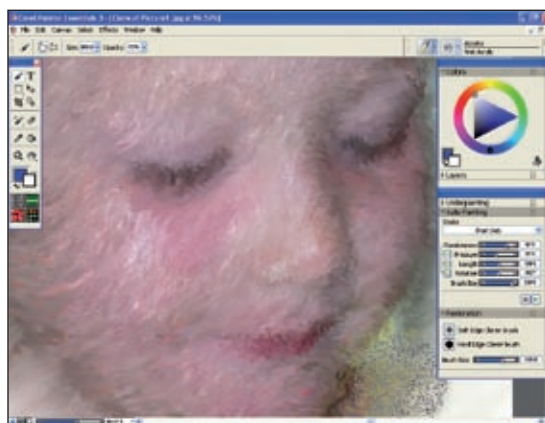
The program opens with a Welcome screen modelled on a spiral-bound pad. From here, you can dive straight into a new painting, view ready-made examples (some of which animate to show how they were created) or run through a few brief tutorials. Once you're into the main screen, the user interface is reminiscent of image-editing programs, with a toolbox at the left and palettes at the right. Core features such as selection tools and layers are in the same mould, as are basic filters such as Sharpen and Brightness/Contrast.

Picking the Brush tool activates the selected brush, chosen from a pair of drop-down menus at the top right. Categories include Acrylics, Oils, Chalk, Crayons, plus Digital Watercolor, a special class

of wet brushes. With these, strokes continue to bleed and merge after you've painted them. It's a nice touch, but you get only a small number of watercolour brushes.

To reproduce a photo, open it and choose Clone, then pick the Clone Brush tool and choose from a range of cloning brushes. Painting with these picks up colour from the photo, creating a painted version. If that seems like hard work, choose a stroke style in the Auto Painting palette and press the Play button to automate the process, with random brushstrokes gradually filling the canvas. However, although the strokes look natural, the result isn't always satisfactory.

The Impressionist cloner gives a swirly effect, but may leave your photo looking unrecognisable. Underpainting can help by increasing contrast or smoothing the photo before you start cloning, and Restoration lets you paint back the original photo to retrieve detail, before going over it manually with a smaller brush.



▲ The Restoration tool in Corel Painter Essentials 3 lets you retrieve detail by painting back the original photograph

Painter not only supports graphics tablets but responds to tilt as well as pressure; when you're using an airbrush and hold the pen flatter, the spray of dots fans out in a conical shape from the tip, as it would with a real spray device. However, you can't control how the parameters of each brush respond to stylus pressure.

Painter Essentials is faster than previous versions, but won't keep up with a reasonable speed of movement if you use complex brushes at large sizes. Despite being a cut-down version, it is quite confusing for beginners, with options arranged and named unintuitively.

At £60 including VAT, you must be sure Painter Essentials is right for you before shelling out. Therefore, you should download the 30-day trial version from www.corel.com to give it a go.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Good range of art tools
- ✓ Useful general features
- ✗ Can be awkward to use

PAINTING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP or later, 500MHz Pentium II processor, 256MB RAM, 150MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.corel.com/painteressentials

MICROSOFT
Expression Studio

PAINTING RATING: ★★★★★
£469 inc VAT

In the 1990s, a small software company called Creature House invented a new way to create digital brush strokes. 'Skeletal strokes' were constructed from vector paths, but with bitmap images applied to give an amazing range of effects, from realistic paints to intricate patterns and complex 3D-effect shapes. Creature House Expression gathered a cult following on PC and Mac, until in 2003 its success came to the attention of Microsoft.

Having bought Expression, Microsoft had no idea what to do with it. A public beta appeared under the name Acrylic, indicating that it was still seen primarily as a painting program, but it was then rolled into a group of programs aimed at web designers, lending the Expression name to the whole suite.

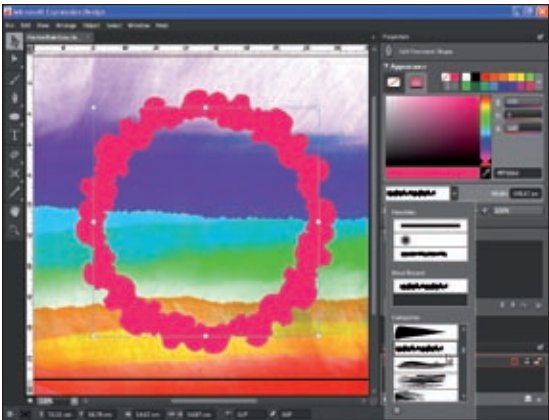
If you didn't know all this, you might think that Expression Design was just an esoteric graphics utility within a web-design package. It's far more than that. The user interface is neat and attractive, using the white-on-grey look that's becoming popular in image-editing software. In

the toolbox on the left are various ways of creating lines and shapes, including a freehand brush, a bezier pen and geometric shapes. Whichever way you produce a path, you can stroke it with a range of brushes that you select from a menu on the right, including watercolours, oils, inks, pencils and patterns. The way the brush stroke follows the path usually looks natural, and can be customised.

Vector tools are available to edit, combine and distort paths, and there's a capable text tool, with the facility to flow text along a path. You can import images and apply Photoshop-style adjustments and effects, and although there are

no cloning features to turn photos into paintings, you can auto-trace photos into vector shapes with a high degree of control, opening up a lot of creative possibilities.

Although it's better for graphic design work than expressive painting, the program is simple to use and very responsive. Being able



▲ Expression Design is better for graphic design work than expressive painting, but it is simple to use and very responsive

to manipulate individual strokes and apply brushes to geometric shapes as well as freehand allows you to create effects in minutes that would be impossible in any other software.

Design is available only as part of Expression Studio. At £469 including VAT, it is out of reach of anyone only interested in vector painting. An Academic edition of Studio is available for around £75 if you or your kids qualify as a student or teacher. Alternatively, the original Creature House Expression 3 was made available as a free download from Microsoft; although this is not advertised within the Microsoft website, a link is available if you look up 'creature house expression' at www.wikipedia.org. You'll need a Windows Live ID, such as an MSN email address.

SUMMARY

✓ Unique and powerful vector strokes

✓ Good general image-editing features

✗ Not available as a standalone program

ILLUSTRATION SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP SP2/Vista, 1GHz Pentium processor, 512MB RAM, 150MB disk space, DirectX 9 graphics

SUPPLIER www.softwareselect.co.uk

DETAILS www.microsoft.com/expression

NATUREPAINTER
Digital Canvas

★★★★
£24 inc VAT

NaturePainter Digital Canvas is designed to replicate the experience of painting and is aimed at learners. You don't get any image-editing functions such as selections, masks, filters or layers, or the facility to trace photos; there's just a blank canvas and half a dozen basic brush types. Apart from a palette knife, there is no other media to play with. The user interface is basic, with only a few icons in the toolbars and hardly anything in the menus.

You don't have to fiddle around before you can start painting. The cursor shows the shape and size of the current brush, and you can click and drag to get on with it. Brush size, pressure and amount of paint can all be adjusted using sliders. Each brush tip consists of a group of coloured lines, like bristles, that follow your cursor. If you hold down the right mouse button and move it around, the brush tip rotates, so you can set it at whatever angle you prefer, although you can't rotate it while you paint.

No predefined colour palettes are provided, so you have to mix your own colours. You do this by adding percentages of preset colours to a scale. Rather than being mixed

into a single solid colour, these are then divided proportionally between your bristles, so you get a striped or mottled effect as you paint. This helps to give a distinctive look to NaturePainter artwork. Another key feature is the With/Without Paint button. Click this and you can brush over the canvas with dry bristles, blending previous strokes together.

There's no support for graphics tablets, so you can't vary the width or opacity of your stroke; within the selected brush size, every stroke starts wide and fades off to narrow, with no control available. The default image size is a small 750x550 pixels, which you can change, although the nominal resolution is oddly fixed at 50 pixels per inch. The largest brush size isn't very large, yet the program still has trouble keeping up when you paint with it unless you have a fast PC.

This means NaturePainter is best suited to low-resolution artwork, intended to be displayed onscreen.

The software hasn't been upgraded since 2003, but is still on sale and has an active user community,



▲ In NaturePainter Digital Canvas, the cursor shows the shape and size of the current brush

notably at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/naturepainter>. We didn't come across any major bugs, except that when you're zoomed in and try to rotate the brush the artwork zooms back out while the brush rotates madly at high speed. Although it's a 16-bit application, it seems to work fine in 32-bit Windows Vista.

NaturePainter is unsophisticated and has only a small set of features, but it's quite effective in its own way. At £24 including VAT it's not a huge bargain, but is worth considering if straight painting is what you're after. Since it's so easy to use, you can concentrate on developing your art skills. The free shareware version has no time limit, but won't save or load paintings, although there's nothing to stop you screen-grabbing your artwork.

SUMMARY

✓ Simple to use

✗ No pressure sensitivity

✗ Limited features

PAINTING SOFTWARE Requirements not stated

SUPPLIER www.naturepainter.net

DETAILS www.naturepainter.net

PIXARRA TwistedBrush 13.5

★★★★★

\$170 (around £85)

TwistedBrush comes from Pixarra, a small independent developer. What it lacks in polish it makes up for in smart thinking. When you run it, a Quick Start Guide points out where everything is and offers descriptions of the key tools. It's about getting you painting as quickly as possible. You don't have to save and load artwork; your 'sketchbook' contains up to 100 pages, which you can switch between at will, with your work auto-saved as you go along.

At the top left of the screen is a list of brushes. Click any of these to choose another from a range of ArtSets, each containing dozens of tools; there are around 3,000 in total. These cover all the usual categories, including hundreds of oils and watercolours. Oil paints smooch, watercolours have characteristic haziness or dark, bleeding outlines, and new strokes interact with previous ones. There are pastels, pens, pencils and airbrushes, too, and mask brushes to protect areas you don't want to paint over. Graphics tablet pressure can be linked to brush size, density or opacity.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Straightforward and sensible interface
- ✓ Wide range of convincing brushes
- ✗ Expensive

PAINTING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 95 or later, 20MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.pixarra.com
DETAILS www.pixarra.com

Choosing from predefined brushes is less hassle than adjusting parameters to create your own, but if you want to you can open the Brush Effects Panel to access a matrix of options that control the underlying brush effects engine.

When you explore the more advanced features, usability does slip, with lots of technical-sounding commands. Professional features include layers with a range of blending modes, drawing guides and the ability to record and play back sequences of strokes, saving them for future use or as a movie clip.

To work from a photo, load it and set it as a clone source, then paint from it on to a blank page. There's no auto-paint, but the cloning

brushes work well, allowing you to produce a convincing paint or pastel rendering without any skill.

TwistedBrush has some bad points. When you add strokes on top of each other, textures blend but colours don't mix properly. Many brushes aren't anti-aliased,



▲ The cloning brushes in Pixarra TwistedBrush work well, letting you produce a convincing paint or pastel rendering

so strokes have slightly jagged edges; this is most visible with fine pen and pencil line work. When you create a mask, it persists when you switch to another page unless you delete it. The software struggles to keep up with your hand when using more complex brushes at decent sizes and when cloning from high-res photos.

Still, we were impressed with TwistedBrush. However, at \$170 (around £85), it's expensive, although this price includes all future upgrades. You can try it free for 15 days, or buy a longer limited version from \$40 (£20) for six months. The cut-down TwistedBrush Essentials is \$30 (£15), but this limits you to 120 brushes and leaves out cloning and tracing. We'd have liked a budget version with photo tracing left in.

STREETWISE SOFTWARE Professor Franklin's Instant Photo Artist 2.0

★★

\$60 (around £30)

Coming with effusive recommendations from publications as illustrious as *Time* magazine, Instant Photo Artist promises to help "turn any photo into a painted masterpiece". You could use its natural media tools to paint from scratch, but photo conversion is what it's aimed at.

The unusual interface has a number of areas demarcated by 3D-effect borders. Your blank canvas is on the right, with tools on the left. By default, the canvas is 900x900 pixels square, which is not very big for good-quality printing. When you load a photo by clicking the Source Photo button, it's converted to a blue-on-white outline. This is used only as a guide, which can be turned on and off. Next, you pick from the art tools on the left – pencil, brush, pastel, pen or airbrush – and choose from a small number of options for each, which appear as tiny thumbnails, without descriptions, in an icon bar that scrolls slowly. You can then switch between just five preset sizes. Alternatively, clicking Styles of the Masters gives you several dozen options,

ranging from Cézanne to Graffiti, each of which sets an appropriate tool and size.

To apply your media, you choose from four modes: Artistic picks up colour from the photo and smooches it around, Realistic reveals the photo where you paint, Freehand ignores the photo, and Erase removes paint. Painting manually is like photo cloning in Painter Essentials or ArtRage, but not as controllable or rewarding. Multi-step Undo and Redo are supported, but with no keyboard short cut. There's no support for graphics tablets.

If you can't be bothered with all this, click Auto Paint. This fills in the canvas using unsuitable and much too regular diagonal strokes, sweeping from top right to bottom left and leaving a sort of serrated edge all round, then progresses inwards with a higher level of detail. Although the results are reminiscent of art media, we were hard pushed to detect much resemblance to the selected style.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Acceptable results almost instantly
- ✗ Auto painting doesn't look natural
- ✗ Very limited functions for the price

PAINTING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 95/98/Me/2000/NT/XP/Vista, 50MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.swssoftware.com
DETAILS www.swssoftware.com



▲ Professor Franklin's Instant Photo Artist 2.0 gives you four modes to apply media: Artistic, Realistic, Freehand and Erase

No effects or filters are provided. You can add text to your artwork, and there's a shadow option, so that your brushstrokes look as if they're floating. There's one more button, marked Create Greeting Cards, but this just links to the website of a US-only print-ordering service. The program crashed a couple of times while we were using it, losing our work; this will be even more vexing if you're using the trial version, since you can run it only four times within 30 days.

Instant Photo Artist offers a quick and easy way to turn a photo into something vaguely arty. Comparing the features with the price, however, we can't help but notice a disparity. Not that £30 is a lot, but this entire package would qualify as little more than a single tool within others.